

William Casey
Case Study in Intelligence Community Leadership

by

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14. ABSTRACT In today's world of intelligence investigations and commissions, history seems to be repeating itself. The realm of intelligence is a powerful influencer on foreign policy with some intelligence professionals believing that intelligence products need to be policy-neutral and provide assessments that are unbiased. This is the case for the majority of the intelligence community; however, there is one position that must balance that requirement – the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI). William J. Casey's tenure in this position provides a study of the difficulties of this position. Many intelligence observers feel that DCI Casey imposed his view on intelligence analysis. Over the years from 1981 till his death in 1987, Casey's star would dim in the eyes of the public and their elected officials serving on the intelligence committees. Irregardless of the relationship between Casey and the rest of the intelligence community, the Congress, or the press, he will be remembered for his influencing and shaping of American foreign policy.						
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In today's world of intelligence investigations and commissions, history seems to be repeating itself. The realm of intelligence is a powerful influencer on foreign policy with some intelligence professionals believing that intelligence products need to be policy-neutral and provide assessments that are unbiased. This is the case for the majority of the intelligence community; however, there is one position that must balance that requirement – the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI).

William J. Casey's tenure in this position provides a study of the difficulties of this position. Many intelligence observers feel that DCI Casey imposed his view on intelligence analysis.¹ Furthermore, many Congressmen on the United States House of Representatives and Senate intelligence committees (HPSCI and SSCI) believed that Casey would only provide them information which Casey deemed necessary. Over the years from 1981 till his death in 1987, Casey's star would dim in the eyes of the public and their elected officials serving on the intelligence committees.²

Irregardless of the relationship between Casey and the rest of the intelligence community, the Congress, or the press, he will be remembered for his influencing and shaping of American foreign policy.³ DCI Casey impacted the intelligence community in many ways that were both negative and positive. An examination will be conducted on how he performed in his role as the head of the Intelligence Community (IC) by first reviewing his Congressional nomination hearing, and comparing it to how critics viewed him afterward. Whether he was an effective

¹ Jay Taylor, "When Intelligence Reports Become Political Tools...", *Washington Times*, 29 June 2003. B2.

² Robert M. Gates, *From The Shadows* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 213-215.

³ Joseph E. Persico, *Casey* (New York: Penguin Group, 1990), 575-576.

Director of the Intelligence Community, a powerful force in the Reagan administration, or as a World War II OSS relic, who wanted to fight communism, will be in the eye of the beholder.

NOMINATION HEARINGS

In 1984, William Casey viewed Congress as “a bunch of meddlers who were messing around in his business.”⁴ On the other side of the table, Congressmen like Patrick Leahy and David Durenburger viewed Casey with mistrust. So this 1984 situation begs the question, what happened to that unanimous support Casey received at his confirmation vote? To understand that we must first examine what did DCI-nominee William J. Casey promise the SSCI on 13 January 1981 at his nomination hearing.

Opening Statement

William Casey’s opening statement before the SSCI was well received and applauded by all of the members because it contained the language they were hoping to hear.⁵ It reflected their belief that the intelligence community, and, in particular, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was in a state of disrepair. Casey promised the senators that he viewed the CIA as a sacred

⁴ George J. Church, “No place left to hide? In rebuilding the CIA, Casey has missteps and infuriated Congress,” *Time*, 30 April 1984, 12.

⁵ United States Congress, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Nomination of William J. Casey to be Director of Central Intelligence*, hearings, 97th Congress, 1st Session, 13 January 1981, 20 & 25. Cited hereafter as SSCI, Casey.

institution whose role had dimensioned. Inherit in this, he promised to “correct these problems, improve performance...”⁶

Pledge To Work With Congress

In Casey’s testimony, he promised to work closely with Congress on monitoring and improving the performance of the Intelligence Community. In particular, the Congress was concerned that the National Intelligence Estimates (NIE) were outdated and wrong. This concern was justified since the IC had failed to predict the fall of the Shah in Iran and the rise of Islamic extremism throughout the Middle East.⁷ In addition, the CIA had received bad report cards from both the Pike and Church commissions. During the Carter administration, the CIA was restrained in its ability to do covert operations and unable to influence strategic policy.⁸

Oversight

The most important aspect of William Casey’s nomination was his promise to keep the SSCI and HPSCI informed of all intelligence activities. All the members of the SSCI stated they expected the DCI to provide them updates. Senator Joseph Biden stated that he would expect any nominee for the Director of Central Intelligence to recognize the role of Congress to improve intelligence; plus, he would not support anyone who withheld information or documents from the

⁶ SSCI, Casey, 14.

⁷ Persico, 209-210.

⁸ Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA & American Democracy* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989), 216-217, 223.

oversight committees.⁹ This was second by Senator Patrick Moynihan's statement to Casey when he congratulated Casey on his opening statement and Casey's "pledge to cooperate fully in the facilitating the oversight through Congress,"¹⁰ and Casey's assurance that no intelligence activities will be conducted without the knowledge of the intelligence committees. In response, Casey reassured both Senators Biden and Moynihan that:

Well, Senator, I intend to comply fully with the spirit and the letter of the Intelligence Oversight Act. I intend to provide this committee with the information it believes it needs for oversight purposes.¹¹

Clearly, Casey left no doubt in the minds of the SSCI in January 1981 that he intended to keep them informed.

Grey Area

The hearings did also address the potential and likely event that intelligence operations are fluid and timely notification would not always be possible. To this, Casey promised the SSCI that he could provide the committee information on CIA activities. Specifically, he told the SSCI that he could not conceive of any circumstance that he would not be able to provide them in a "timely" manner the information they needed.¹² Addressing Senator Biden questioning on this matter, Casey told the SSCI that he could not think of any reason why he could not report

⁹ SSCI, Casey, 20.

¹⁰ SSCI, Casey, 21-22.

¹¹ SSCI, Casey, 25.

¹² SSCI, Casey, 25 & 46.

intelligence operations even if it may embarrass the administration. Casey also stated that the people of the United States and the Congress had every right to know.¹³

Rebuilding the Intelligence Community

One of the most important and successful aspects was Casey's ability to rebuild the CIA. Casey's influence in changing the CIA from a second class agency to a coveted government institution changed during his tenure at CIA.¹⁴ In fact, few CIA observers dispute the fact that Casey's determination to improve the quality of CIA intelligence gathering and analysis. In addition, morale increased, with recruiting of young scholars also improving.¹⁵

During he nomination hearings, Senators Lugar and Wallop questioned Casey on how he planned on improving the CIA. Casey's strategy was three-fold. First, he intended on letting the Congress share in the task. This meant funding. Second, Casey recognized that the CIA was the center of all intelligence. He wanted to pull intelligence from all sectors of American society. He believed that there were scholars in the colleges and universities, as well as, people in the business community that needed to be tapped for their information and sources. In particular, he wanted to utilize Middle Eastern scholars who understood the Islamic culture, the turmoil in the region, and had overseas contacts. Third, he wanted to reestablish confidence in the people already working in the CIA. Casey planned on accomplishing this by retaining quality

¹³ SSCI, Casey, 47.

¹⁴ Robert S. Dudley & Orr Kelly, "Inside CIA: What's really going on?," *U.S. News & World Report*, 25 June 1984, 27.

¹⁵ Robert Manning, "Casey's CIA: New Clout, New Danger," *U.S. News & World Report*, 16 June 1986, 24-25.

employees and promoting the best, paying them for exemplary work, and getting them talking to experts outside of the Intelligence Community.¹⁶

Trust Between CIA & Congress

Throughout the hearing, an underlying, yet, unspoken issue that the senators were trying to establish was a mutual trust between them and William Casey. When asked by Senator Biden if he thought Congress [SSCI] could not keep secrets, Casey responded that he believed most leaks occurred in the Department of Defense. Casey said that he “would be shocked if any...come from this committee and I don’t in any way expect it.”¹⁷ Furthermore, Casey reinforced his trust in Congress by stating that the public had an incorrect perception of the Congress’ ability to keep secrets. The Congress had a vested interest in maintaining a consultative relationship and the sharing of information permitted the Congress to conduct oversight in a responsible manner.¹⁸

Casey’s reputation and long history in the intelligence profession allowed the members of the SSCI to establish an initial trust of him. This was apparent in the full-range of compliments Casey received at the beginning of the hearing. The members were pleased with Casey’s involvement in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the CIA, during World War II; plus, they knew Casey had served in various government positions, as well as, on intelligence reform commissions. According to his former Deputy DCI, Robert Gates, Casey

¹⁶ SSCI, Casey, 29-30.

¹⁷ SSCI, Casey, 35-36.

¹⁸ SSCI, Casey, 35.

allowed his OSS experience to guide him in running the CIA. Casey was at war, just as Wild Bill Donovan, ran the OSS during World War II.¹⁹

POST-NOMINATION RELATIONSHIP WITH CONGRESS

Honey Moon Period

The courting that William Casey would give Congress would be over within a couple of months of taking office. The newspapers would soon start publishing a series of financial and CIA appointments that made Casey look irresponsible and untrustworthy; however, throughout the next six years, even after numerous calls for his resignation, Casey would stick it out. He had long before figured out that President Reagan would not fire him. Reagan could not fire anyone, even, a person like William Casey, who made it a habit of being in the public eye.²⁰

Casey's attitude toward informing

William Casey's memory as DCI stirs mixed messages in members and staff of the HPSCI. Some people view him as a snake, while others viewed him as a person determined on running the CIA without telling Congress.²¹ In the next six years, Casey would demonstrate through his actions, his contempt and unwillingness to fully inform Congress of significant CIA or intelligence community activities. While he maintained he always told Congress, the fact is that

¹⁹ Gates, 201.

²⁰ Persico, 227 & 251-253.

²¹ Betty Scrivner, untitled lecture presented in NFI 626 class at the Joint Military Intelligence College, Washington, DC, 15 January 2004.

many members of the oversight committees felt Casey was being less than honest. This would eventually lead to Casey being disliked by members of the Reagan administration and the media.²²

Keeping Congress In Dark – Supplying the Mujahedin

Almost immediately after taking office as DCI, William Casey was told by his Deputy Director for Operations (DDO) that the United States had been supplying the Mujahedin with weapons. By 1981, lawmakers were asking questions on this operation. They wanted to know who was getting the weapons. How were the Russians reacting? Were Afghan peasants dieing at the cost of expanding United States foreign policy. Upon hearing this from his DDO, Casey allegedly dismissed the questions and remarked that “we’re going to make these people [Congress] understand what we learned in World War II.”²³ In all, the United States involvement since 1979 would exceed \$1 billion dollars. Nearly 30% of that aid, which included Stingers, would be stolen by Pakistan – the country which most of the weapons were funneled through.²⁴

²² Scrivner lecture, 15 January 2004.

²³ Persico, 226.

²⁴ Manning, 30-31.

Iran-Contra

The allegations that William Casey masterminded and intentionally misled Congress over the selling of weapons to the Iranians is full of theories and conflicting testimony.²⁵ One Casey observer chronicled Casey's negative attitude toward Congress in 1985-1986, the years when the arms for hostages were being conducted out of the National Security Council. In fact, Casey was determined on supporting the Contras against Soviet expansion in 1984, along with placing himself in the history books as the man who thwarted Soviet aggression.²⁶

Casey's Influence

Casey's determination to influence Reagan's foreign policy went as far as Casey getting Reagan's speech writers to compare the Contras as heroes. When asked by the SSCI on 17 April 1985 if the CIA was supporting the Contras, Casey said the CIA had no ties.²⁷ This statement was not believed by the Chairman of the SSCI. By this time, Senator Durenburger had told the *New York Times* that Casey was a used car salesman. He rated him 2 out of 10.²⁸ Yet, the question regarding the sale of arms to Iran in exchange for hostages, with the profits going to support the Contras takes an opposite viewpoint according to George McCullough.

²⁵ *Investigating the October Surprise*, produced by PBS Frontline, distributed by PBS, New York, 17 April 1992, videocassette.

²⁶ Persico, 425.

²⁷ Persico, 433; The actual testimony is classified so the exact language and would not be available to the author in time to prepare this paper.

²⁸ Persico, 422.

Casey Knows Nothing

Casey claimed he knew nothing about the funneling of weapon profits to the Contras, a clear violation of the Boland Amendment. Second, Casey would have been in violation of the Hughes-Ryan Amendment. McCullough served as the Director of the DCI Executive Staff in November-December 1986, when Casey was required to testify before the oversight committees. According to McCullough, he never saw any messages or correspondence that dealt with the shipment of arms to Iran. Furthermore, he says that Casey “never held a meeting in his office on the general subject of the Iran arms deals or gave the subject much attention until the early fall of 1986.”²⁹ McCullough recalls that the Iran arms operations never was a concern of the DCI because Casey was preoccupied with the following: the United States raid on Libya, various arrests and indictments of CIA leakers, Casey’s concern about obtaining Congressional funding for the Contras, and a number of Soviet-U.S. arms control issues.³⁰

Casey’s testimony to the Congress in November-December 1986 was marked with denial of any knowledge about the funneling of funds to the Contras. His testimony would be short-lived because in December 1986, Casey became fatally ill. Some conspiracy theorists believe that Casey’s illness was the work of his own agency.³¹ Specifically, Casey stated that he did not know about any diversion of funds until Attorney General Meese told him in November 1986. This would not satisfy the SSCI because Congressman Lee Hamilton, the Chairman of the HPSCI, would accuse Casey of failing to notify them about the previously approved Presidential

²⁹ James McCullough, “Personal Reflections of Bill Casey’s Last Month at CIA,” *Central Intelligence Agency Study of Intelligence*, URL: <http://cia.gov/csi/studies/96unclass/casey/htm>. Accessed 15 January 2004.

³⁰ McCullough, *Casey*.

³¹ Arthur S. Hulnick, *Fixing the Spy Machine* (Wesport, Connecticut, Praeger, 1999), 178.

findings, documents signed by President Reagan, authorizing the sell of weapons to Iran.³² As December 1986 rolled on the Iran-Contra investigating committee would tire of Casey and start suspecting Casey of knowing more than he was willing to testify. Congressman Peter Kostmayer believed that Casey looked “befuddled” and questioning Bill Casey was like punching a pillow. Casey’s own Press Secretary believed that by 11 December 1986, Casey’s brain tumor had grown to the point where he would stumble and fumble in his testimony. Within a few days, Casey would collapse and be diagnosed with a brain tumor.³³

Trusted Or Not?

William Casey’s distrust of Congress and Congress of Casey marked their relationship throughout Casey’s tenure as DCI. Both Iran-Contra and support of the Mujahedin illustrate only two specific events in the years 1981 through 1986. The inability of Congress to keep secrets was a source of agitation for Casey because he believed Congress was not able to keep secrets and would use information for their political advancement. Casey would justify his lack of detailed information to Congress based on the premise that the information was leaked.³⁴ His contempt for Congress was evident when the SSCI began investigating past Casey business deals that occurred before he assumed duties as DCI. He would often say to colleagues, “How was he

³² Persico, 536 & 545-546.

³³ Persico, 548 – 551.

³⁴ Master Sergeant Todd A. Voter, USA, *The Director of the Central Intelligence’s Role, Responsibilities, and Powers, A Case Against Reform: The Tenure of William Casey*, MSSI Thesis chaired by LtCol Anne Miles, PhD. (Washington, DC: Joint Military Intelligence College, August 1999), 95.

suppose to run the CIA with gnats [Congress] always distracting him?”³⁵ Casey’s distrust of the SSCI began as early as March 1982. When John McMahon, Casey’s Deputy Director for Operations, was making the traditional Congressional office calls, he recalls HPSCI member Norman Mineta stating that “He [Casey] treats us like mushrooms – he keeps us in the dark and feeds us manure.”³⁶ To further illustrate that Casey’s distrust lasted throughout his tenure, in March 1986, Casey gave Congress a 40-page document. While the SSCI was pleased to receive the document, they realized that Casey was still determined to conceal information from the Congressional oversight committees. In fact, Casey would argue that in 1986 ““ Congressional oversight of the intelligence community is conducted of the cuff...involves the repeated compromise of sensitive intelligence sources and methods.””³⁷ Finally, nearing the end of Casey’s tenure, many media personalities would still continue to distrust William Casey believing he knew more about the Iran-Contra; for example, William Buckley said the Casey greatest sin was his willingness to leave Congress in the dark, a clear violation of his lawful responsibility as DCI.³⁸ Even after Casey resigned due to his terminal illness, the Joint Committee blamed Casey for the diversion of funds to the Contras. Whether we can trust Oliver North’s testimony that Casey was the mastermind, we will never know.³⁹

³⁵ Persico, 268-269.

³⁶ Persico, 297.

³⁷ George Church, “The Senators vs. the Spooks, Congress prods Casey into drafting a Top Secret CIA Master Plan,” *Time*, 3 March 1986, 18-19.

³⁸ Persico, 562.

³⁹ Persico, 568-569.

Casey's Legacy

William Casey's legacy as DCI has been mixed, depending on who you talk to or read. On one side of the fence you have those who remember him as a transformation leader, who took charge of the CIA when it was at its lowest. The 1970s had been a low decade because the numbers of covert operations were low, Human Intelligence collectors were down, and the reputation of the CIA was negative.⁴⁰ Yet, in less than six years, Casey was able to get Congress to triple the budget, which enabled the CIA to triple its employees. The American public was fascinated with the CIA. College recruitment was up with thousands of graduates seeking employment with the CIA. Some observers would equate him as the most powerful director in the history of the CIA.⁴¹

In addition, Casey was a forward-thinker who understood the international community and the reality of serving the national interest. He understood the importance of a strong intelligence community and the need to have strong relationships with allies. His constant push for increasing Congressional funding to support his initiatives resulted in a strong CIA that we see today. Directors that have followed him have benefited from Casey's dedication as DCI. Finally, despite the fact that he died nearly 17 years ago, his influence on people is still evident.⁴²

William Casey did have people who felt that he was the worse DCI ever. To give the opposite point of view, we first must recognize that many of these critics are either Democratic Congressional representatives or liberal-minded media personnel. Political jealousy may have

⁴⁰ SSCI, Casey, 1-9.

⁴¹ Daniel J. Murphy, "CIA Director William Casey – His Analysis and Plain Speech Helped Him Lead the Agency to the Top." *Investor's Business Daily*, 10 April 2000, A4.

⁴² Scrivner lecture, 15 January 2004; Anne D. Miles, Ph.D, untitled lecture presented in NFI 626 class at the Joint Military Intelligence College, Washington, DC, 15 & 26 January 2004.

influenced their views. For example, Congressman Patrick Leahy believed that Casey went too far in influencing policy. Casey, to Leahy, did not maintain objectivity when approving NIEs or other intelligence products. Specifically, Casey would use intelligence to influence or shape policy.⁴³ Casey's image was at an all-time low immediately following his resignation. One liberal reporter painted him as a "frail old man...his emaciated right arm hanging limply in his lap, his eyes staring vacantly overhead...his lip was curled...he lost control..."⁴⁴ This first sentence in Traver's article summed-up the liberal views of many Casey critics.

⁴³ Persico, 575.

⁴⁴ Nancy Traver, "Casey's Well-Groomed Successor; New CIA Chief Robert Gates Must Restore the Agency's Image," *Time*, 16 February 1987, 22.

CASEY'S IMPACT ON THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY

The story of William Casey's tenure as DCI can be viewed through two sets of binoculars. Though one set of binoculars, a person can see a man who promised Congress full and complete information; however, many would view him as being less than honest, less than truthful, or less than timely in providing Congress with the status of CIA activities. Plus, critics would point out that he influenced intelligence analysts to change their intelligence assessments to fit the Reagan administration's foreign policy objectives. Whether this occurred or not depends on who is interviewed or believed. Congressional representatives would describe him as a person who they couldn't trust.

Through the other set of binoculars, people would describe him as a Cold War Warrior who never fit into the modern day politics of the Beltway. Yet, he was a man who had courage and took risks to make a difference to make the intelligence community stronger and better than when he took over in 1981. Risk is quite rare in the Beltway, where a person's reputation is everything. He also supported the people, by providing the consumers with the best intelligence prior to them being sent in harm's way. Undoubtedly, the facts point out that the CIA's reputation and public perception had increased favorably.

Casey's tenure as a DCI showcases the power of that position. My assessment is that Casey's contributions outweigh the criticism he received because today's Intelligence Community has benefited greatly due to Casey. Today's CIA continues to be viewed as a powerful force multiplier and their influence is valued and respected. William Casey's legacy can still be felt.

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